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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000748

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: IRAN SEEKS FRIENDS IN MADAGASCAR

Classified By: AMBASSADOR NIELS MARQUARDT FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a November 4 meeting with Ambassador Marquardt, Moroccan Ambassador Mohammed Amar gave a detailed read-out of the recent visit of Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Special Envoy of the President, Hossain Sheikholislam. After meeting with the Malagasy Prime Minister, Sheikholislam convened a dinner party on November 3 of ambassadors from Islamic African states, sharing not only his offer of support for the African Union summit in July/August 2009, but also his views on Madagascar's relationship with the West, the current and future American administrations, Iran's regional leadership, and a host of other issues. Traditionally somewhat suspicious of Islam (and particularly Iran, which maintains an embassy here), Madagascar responded non-committally to the Iranian offer. Amar's take was clear, however: an overconfident Iran is seeking to impress its African contacts, but has failed to convey a convincing argument for their stark view of global affairs to an already skeptical African and Arab audience. END SUMMARY.

IRAN IN A NUTSHELL, OVER DINNER

12. (C) Sheikholislam's visit received little publicity, and details of the offer for AU Summit support have not been made public. Press reports noted that Sheikholislam pushed for strengthened ties between the two countries, invited President Ravalomanana to visit Tehran in the near future, and brought up the possibility of future cooperation on an oil project in Madagascar. Before departing, however, he gathered the Ambassadors of Morocco, Senegal, Algeria, Comoros, Mauritius, and Libya -- as well as Iran's own resident envoy -- for a frank, four-hour dinner discussion of Iran's ambitious plans. According to Ambassador Amar of Morocco (a close embassy friend with a proven track record of providing us a window into the activities here of other Islamic players), Sheikholislam expressed Iranian pleasure with Madagascar's "attitude towards the West", focusing on their occasionally tenuous relationship with France (e.g. expelling the French ambassador last summer). Amar noted that Sheikholislam's discourse was delivered with an arrogant confidence determined to portray Iran as a regional powerhouse with global influence, but failed to inspire much comment or enthusiasm among the invitees.

13. (C) On the current state of affairs in the Middle East, Sheikholislam asserted that the current U.S. administration "did more for Iran than they could have ever done on their own", in deposing Saddam Hussein (and favoring Shiites), taking on the Taliban (historically enemies of Iran), and "showing the world the true face of the United States

abroad". Convinced that the world now understands what the U.S. truly stands for, he believes that Muslims all over the world should side with Iran, and that in fact a debt of gratitude was owed to the U.S. administration, for "it will take generations to erase what they've done".

¶4. (C) Per Amar, Sheikholislam stated that Iran has never been more powerful, nor the Shia community in the region more influential. Covering a broad spectrum of issues, with little prompting from his audience, Sheikholislam said that no country in the world will ever stop Iran from pursuing its nuclear program, that Iran would supply weapons to Hamas if they were to ask, and that the best tools for dealing with Israel are "time and violence". He insisted upon Iran's ability to consistently influence elections in both Israel and the U.S. (by publicly supporting their desired candidate's opponent), and predicted that an Obama presidency, although more prepared to negotiate, will nonetheless seek "economic advantages" in the region.

MORE ROYAL THAN THE KING

¶5. (C) Much of the audience allegedly remained mute throughout this "exchange", but two points in particular left the Moroccan Ambassador uncomfortable: Iranian support for Algeria, and Sheikholislam's push for "Muslim solidarity" on problems that Morocco is more inclined to see as "Arab" issues, particularly the future of Palestine. On Algeria, Sheikholislam reiterated Iran's unqualified support for "whatever they may need". Given the Moroccan/Algerian border dispute, and mutual fears of terrorist support in the others'

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backyard, Amar was not reassured by Sheikholislam's further suggestion that Morocco's desire for negotiated solutions in conflicts like Palestine is more due to the Morocco's royalist preference for stability over change. Amar, and the Moroccan government, seek a two-state solution and find Iranian meddling in this "Arab issue" troublesome; why, he said he asked, are the Iranians trying to be "more Palestinian than the Palestinians themselves" by pouring gas on the fire?

WRONG PLACE, WRONG AUDIENCE

¶6. (C) COMMENT: In the scope of his commentary, and the odd choice of his audience, Sheikholislam seems to have missed his mark. The Muslim community in Madagascar is small, diverse, and somewhat disenfranchised. Amar said that Iran's Ambassador to Madagascar, Homatash Abdoul Rahim, spent the dinner rephrasing his Minister's commentary into the third-person: "The Minister says..." rather than "I -- or we -- believe...", perhaps indicating his discomfort with the message that superseded any Farsi/French translation difficulties.

¶7. (C) Despite occasional tensions with France, Iran seems to have misread Madagascar's relationship with the West. The press reported here that the envoy invited Ravalomanana to visit Iran, and Ambassador Amar said that the Iranian minister said that the President of Iran plans to attend the 2009 AU Summit here; both seem unlikely to us. Indeed, it is clear to us that Madagascar has no desire for strengthened ties with Iran, and merely tolerates their presence. This attempt to rally African Muslim contacts came off as clumsy, and Iran will have its work cut out to promote Muslim ties over Malagasy, African, or even Arab relationships. END COMMENT.
MARQUARDT